

## Leonard B. Meyer

THE first and only curator of the Scarsdale Science Museum passed away December 30, 2007. A newsletter from the Museum's heyday in the late 1920s announced a reduction in the Curiosities department in order to strengthen the collection in Industrial Arts. To that end, recent acquisitions had included an automobile tire by the Firestone Co., of uncertain provenance. Visitors were welcome Sunday mornings after eleven. They could view the exhibitions in the playroom of the curator, Leonard B. Meyer.

In the early 1980s, when as a lowly graduate student I first met the august Benjamin Franklin Professor of Music at the University of Pennsylvania, I quickly learned that he lacked all pretense of rank and fame. Though a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he acted like the boyish curator he once was. Recent issues of the journal *Science* were strewn about his work table. In a drawer that might well have been labeled *Curiosities* he eagerly showed me first an article on animal gaits, noting that one might study the embodiment of meter in mammalian locomotion, and then a tattered score of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), wondering aloud if the perceptual cues for closure and articulation evident in Mozart's oeuvre applied equally to that later, far more astringent work. I was amazed that the same person—a *music* person—could find phase diagrams for bipedal motion as fascinating as the fin-de-siècle Viennese avant-garde. Only later did I learn that as a young composer Meyer had studied with Stefan Wolpe, a student of Anton Webern, and had corresponded with Schoenberg himself. It was one of Meyer's other composition teachers, Aaron Copland, who had alerted him to a possible job at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s.

Meyer was tailor made for postwar Hyde Park. His literary training attracted him to writers like Saul Bellow. His undergraduate degree in philosophy from Columbia led him to select the philosopher Charles Morris for his doctoral committee (constituted in the Committee on the History of Culture). His broad knowledge of all the arts helped him to flourish as a teacher in Chicago's noted undergraduate survey course in the humanities. Perhaps explaining the subtleties of the arts to bright non-majors helped him hone his skill at writing about music without resorting to technical cant. He could speak to a political philosopher like Hannah Arendt from the perspective of someone who had fought the Nazis on the front lines in France. It was a heady atmosphere in which many of the "best and brightest" tried to come to terms with the Truman and Eisenhower period, its exaltation of science, its reactionary politics, and the rapid substitution of vernacular, mass art forms for the canonical masterpieces of a past elite. In the midst of this intellectual whirl Meyer's great insight was to locate music in the mind rather than in the written score. He drew upon psychology, the "natural philosophy" of the mind, for explanations of music's emotional impacts and the meanings we ascribe to them. His dissertation (1955) became his first book, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1956).

Meyer's incessant curiosity and openness to new ideas led him to write about almost every aspect of music and music culture. He investigated rhythm through a focus on accent (*The Rhythmic Structure of Music*, 1960, with Grosvenor Cooper), he pondered the state of contemporary music in the turbulent 1960s (*Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Patterns and Predictions in Twentieth-Century Culture*, 1967), he adapted his Bloch lectures at Berkeley—inquiries into the nature of melodic pattern perception—into a book on music analysis (*Explaining Music: Essays and Explorations*, 1973), and he outlined the multilevel constraints that impinge upon musical style (his chapter in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang, 1979), considerably enlarging and enriching that focus in his final and most magisterial monograph (*Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology*, 1989). His last collection of articles was published in 2000 (*The Spheres of Music: A Gathering of Essays*).

Meyer's steady focus on listeners and the psychology of listening made him an inspiration to researchers in the fields of music perception, music psychology, and their later amalgamation as music cognition. Meyer's interests and writings about expectation, attention, Gestalts, pattern perception, and memory all found resonance with leading scholars of music cognition. In the first textbook for this field, *Music Cognition* (1985), W. Jay Dowling singled out the three exemplary forebears: Hermann von Helmholtz, the colossus of nineteenth-century physiological psychology, Robert Francés, author of the *La perception de la musique* (1958), and, of course, Leonard B. Meyer.

Appropriate to the onetime curator of a science museum, Meyer loved data. He saw no contradiction between ideas in information theory or statistics and hypotheses about human learning or categorization. He believed that assertions in humanistic fields ought to be able to withstand statistical tests. In particular, he suspected that understanding the population statistics of musical patterns was

important for music history and that knowing the transition probabilities of musical events was important for music theory. He also recognized, however, that a musical datum was not as simple as an integer. As his great contemporaries Rudolf Arnheim and E. H. Gombrich had done in their integration of psychological and cultural perspectives in art history, so Meyer recognized that an aesthetic object in music, whether tone, chord, phrase, or movement, was a beautiful conspiracy between the musical present and our own musical pasts, between expectation and memory, between our lives and beliefs today and what we have inherited from the artists and thinkers of earlier times.

The intellectual playroom of Leonard B. Meyer is still open to visitors. His books and articles remain testaments to clarity of thought, elegance in writing, and a creative energy that never lost its amazement at the breathtaking curiosities of human artistic achievement.

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